



NEVER TOO LATE TO START

EXERCISE CAN BOOST A SENIOR'S PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH. HERE'S HOW TO GET GOING.

BY **ELISABETH LEE** IN CONSULTATION WITH
DR JOANNE KUA CONSULTANT // FALLS AND BALANCE CLINIC AND INSTITUTE
OF GERIATRICS AND ACTIVE AGEING // TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL

I F YOU HAD THE OPPORTUNITY to add years of healthy life without having to make much of a sacrifice, would you not jump at the chance? According to researchers, half an hour of light exercise, six days a week is all that is needed for an elderly person to reduce their chances of mortality by more than 40 per cent. This was the conclusion drawn after a 12-year Norwegian study of 6,000 men aged 73 and above. Those who took a brisk walk daily reduced their mortality rate by almost half compared to the sedentary group.

This is because exercise reduces the risk of coronary heart disease and helps to maintain muscle strength, thereby preventing falls,

says Dr Joanne Kua, Consultant, Falls and Balance Clinic and Institute of Geriatrics and Active Ageing at Tan Tock Seng Hospital.

Exercise can also enhance cognitive health and reduce feelings of anxiety and depression. Says Dr Kua, “All these benefits work together to prevent disabilities, thus enabling the older adult to live as independently as possible for as long as possible, improving their quality of life.”

Start Slow

It is never too late to start getting active but sedentary older adults should have a thorough medical check-up before starting any activity. This is to rule out any medical conditions that could

preclude them from exercising, recommends Dr Kua.

If your doctor gives you the go-ahead, start slow. Begin with short intervals of light-intensity physical activity — say, five to 10 minutes at a time — and gradually increase the duration of this light activity and the number of days a week of exercising before slowly building up to the desired amount.

The Health Promotion Board’s *National Physical Activity Guidelines* recommend that adults and seniors get 150 minutes a week of moderate-intensity activity such as brisk-walking, or 75 minutes of vigorous aerobic activity such as jogging, in addition to muscle-strengthening activities two days per week. In other words,

going for a brisk half-hour walk five days a week and doing *tai chi* twice a week is sufficient to meet the recommendations.

However, if you have existing medical conditions such as diabetes, osteoarthritis or heart disease, ask your doctor to design a regimen more suited to you. It should take into account the type, frequency, intensity and the progression of the activity.

What If It Hurts?

Stop if you experience discomfort, and consult a doctor. “In older adults, chest discomfort, breathlessness and excessive joint pains may be signs to stop and discuss with their physician the right intensity and type of exercises they are doing,” says Dr Kua.

A common myth is that exercise can contribute to knee pain. Exercise can actually reduce pain and improve mobility, but solving this requires a collaborative effort with the physician and physiotherapist.

“The physician will need to control the pain with medication. The physiotherapist will then

introduce them to stretching, aerobic and strengthening exercises in stages, to help with their osteoarthritis.”

Where To Go

To get started, all you need is a good pair of comfortable walking shoes. Remember to stay cool and hydrated. Bring along a water bottle and wear a hat, and consider timing your walks for the early morning or evening. Lengthen your walks gradually to avoid overdoing it.

If a brisk walk sounds boring, try a group exercise class, such as Zumba Gold at your local community centre.

Or find a buddy to exercise with — not only will a friend keep you entertained, he or she can help you stick to your fitness plan.

“Exercising in groups for older adults has the added benefits of social engagement and mutual encouragement which can help to motivate them to continue to be active,” says Dr Kua.

But if full-on exercising is not your cup of tea, there are plenty of

GET UP AND GO

In addition to the many new fitness corners with elderly-friendly equipment in housing estates in Singapore, here are some resources to help you find a workout that’s right for you.

▶▶ one.pa.gov.sg

FIND YOUR CLOSEST COMMUNITY CENTRE AND SIGN UP FOR A CLASS.

▶▶ BitPAL

A FREE, SUPERVISED 12-WEEK FITNESS PROGRAMME UNDER THE BISHAN-TOA PAYOH ACTIVE LIVING FOR BISHAN-TOA PAYOH RESIDENTS AGED 50 AND UP.

▶▶ [Project Gym Tonic](http://ProjectGymTonic)

“EXERCISE-AS-MEDICINE” PROGRAMME FOR SENIORS WHICH FOCUSES ON EXERCISE AS A MEANS OF IMPROVING PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL HEALTH. WWW.GYMTONIC.SG

other ways to stay active — dancing, playing golf and even vacuuming the floor can be aerobic in nature. Meanwhile, carrying groceries and walking instead of taking the public transport and washing windows or the floor can double up as muscle-strengthening activities. **LW**



ADULTS AND SENIORS NEED ABOUT HALF AN HOUR OF MODERATE EXERCISE PER DAY.